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Taking It On Faith

U In comparison with the FBI, which has been the subject lately of the most intense criticism by the public at large and Congress since its founding, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has been burdened by relatively little public questioning or attack.

At issue in the case of the FBI is a growing belief in the declining competence of its powerful director and allegations that agents have overstepped constitutional bounds in the surveillance and harassment of private citizens. By the very nature of its responsibilities and how they are carried out, the CIA has not been nearly as open to such charges.

✓ Still, CIA Director Richard Helms felt it necessary to ease the nation's worries about official secrecy. And in so doing in a speech delivered to a meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Helms noted that the public appearance of a nation's intelligence chief is unthinkable in most countries.

The CIA, said Helms, is a dedicated, unbiased, money-saving organization which does not interfere in domestic politics and has no police, subpoena or law-enforcement functions. Regrettably, he said, the nation will have to take his word for it. "The nation must to a degree take it on faith that we, too, are honorable men devoted to her service."

Helms further said that he has no easy answer to the objections raised by those who consider intelligence work to be incompatible with democratic principles. There is no easy answer. For as foreign as undercover work is to democracy in theory, it is unquestionably needed in these times to preserve our democratic institution. People tend to reject things they don't understand or know about. But to reject the idea of secrecy in areas so relevant to our national security would be folly.